

AN ACCIDENT

I WAS returning from the hill temple where I had been held up till nearly nine o'clock. I had driven the car down the hill, turned to my left, and gone a few yards further skirting the base of the hill when the engine sighed and spluttered, the whole car jerked and rocked and then came to a dead stop. The hill loomed over me, jackals wailed in the dark. I faithfully got down, went round the car, opened the bonnet, and gazed in. What was the use? I knew nothing about a car's inside. My car was usually well-behaved; and occasionally when it had some trouble I had it pushed to the nearest workshop. Now I went round and round, opened and closed the bonnet, and made futile efforts to start the car. I soon realized that I should be a fool to be going round, prodding here and there, hoping that it could be started somehow. I sat down on the running board, blinking, and hoping that some motorist would come along and help me. The time passed, and not a sign of a human being. The wind rattled the side screen, and unseen insects hummed and whirled about. I had a feeling that I was on some strange planet with myself as the only human being on it.

Presently I said to myself, "I will count ten and if

the car does not start by then I will abandon her and walk home."

I looked at the ground and counted, "One, two, three . . ." I believe after I reached eight or nine I went back to one and counted up ; back and forth untiringly like an auctioneer. After counting half a dozen times thus I turned and saw a shadowy figure at my side. I was startled.

"When did you come here? Who are you?"

"I came here a moment ago, sir."

"I didn't hear you coming. Who are you?"

"My name is Arul Doss, and I am a driver, sir."

"Motor driver?"

"Yes."

It seemed incredible that the Gods should have taken so seriously my threat to abandon the car, and sent a mechanic along.

"Where are you coming from?"

"I am usually here, sir."

"You said you were a driver."

"The car was smashed and I have been without a car since."

"But what do you do for a living?"

"Oh! There is no difficulty about that."

I thought he was mad or slightly drunk, and did not seriously bother to cross-examine him. "Look here, Arul Doss, my car has suddenly broken down. I don't know what is wrong. Can you help me start it?"

He opened the bonnet and examined the engine. He put his head into the car and unscrewed the switchboard.

"Are you able to see anything?" I asked.

"Oh, quite well," he said.

"It is so dark!" I said, the only light we had being the glare of cloud edges catching the city lights.

He came out and declared his diagnosis: "Loose contact, jet trouble. . . ."

"I had it overhauled only a few months ago. It can't be. The car came down so far all right; all this can't have happened just on this spot?"

"Oh, yes. Worse things have happened here. It is a bad place, sir."

"What do you mean by bad?"

"Well, things happen here to a car which we can't understand. It is a bad place, sir."

"Do you tell me that as soon as a car passes this spot its wires snap, its jet is choked, and the battery is run down?"

"Yes, sir."

"It is amazing!" I said.

"It is terrible, sir. For instance, at this very spot my car was smashed, an Austin sedan, hardly a month old."

I remembered the accident. A few months ago an Austin coming down the hill after nightfall dashed against a boulder and was smashed to bits.

"Were you the driver of the car?" I asked.

"Yes, sir."

"But wasn't he killed in the accident?"

"No," he said. It seemed to me another instance of the drunken condition of this man. He seemed to be posing for someone else.

"Will you make my car move on the road again?"

"Yes, sir. I will do my best."

"I will give you two rupees for the service."

He lifted the front seat, picked up the tools, and got under the car for a moment; came out and

buried his head into the bonnet. The only noise for a while was the noise he made with the tools, and his heavy breathing ; and of course the wind rattled the side screen. . . . A quarter of an hour later he started the engine, drove the car a few yards forward, and reversed. "You will have no more trouble, sir. Only, as soon as possible, please change the piston rings," he said. He opened the door and came out of the car muttering. "I have been a driver for twenty-five years, and it pains me when I see a car suffer. For all the twenty-five years I have served only two masters. With the first I stayed for only four years, and with the other for over twenty years. The Austin was the fourth car that my master bought in the twenty years. I was with him since the day he changed from a horse carriage to an Overland of those days. I have loved motor-cars, whatever the make, as no one else can ever love them. If I saw anyone make the slightest scratch on a mudguard I slapped his cheek though he might be an emperor's son. And do you think I would have wilfully dashed and smashed an Austin, which was only a month old ? They say I was drunk. I swear I was not. I have occasionally taken a drink, but I swear I was not drunk that day. Will you kindly go to my master"—he gave me an address—"and tell him that I wasn't drunk and that the accident happened because of the evil nature of the place."

"Such a bad accident ?" I asked.

"You know what this spot can do, but your luck was better than that of the Austin."

I held up two rupees to him. He refused the money. "It is no use to me, sir," he said. "I have greater use for your good-will. If you will have the

kindness to see my master and tell him that I wasn't drunk, I shall be very grateful to you, sir."

I offered him a lift. He declined it. I pressed the self-starter. The engine hummed. I switched on the lights.

The car behaved so well that I was filled with great admiration for the mechanic, and I decided to see his so-called master next day.

I traced the owner of the wrecked Austin. I conveyed to him the driver's message.

"Are you sure it was he?" he asked.

"I don't know. He seemed to be slightly drunk and might be an impostor. But after all, it might be the same fellow. He gave me your address, and it seems he had been with you for twenty years and that you had an Overland once. . . ."

"All that is true, no doubt, but I am puzzled. Arul's skull was jammed when we picked him up, and we carried his remains in a basket and buried him. (What remained of the car could also have been put in a basket.) . . . Don't contradict me; the fellow was drunk. I had caught him several times and warned him. I knew all along that he would come to a bad end."